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The elusive norm of climate responsibility: The Belt and Road Initiative and COVID-19

Sanna Kopra & Matti Nojonen[1]

Based on the premise that climate responsibility had emerged as an international norm in the pre-coronavirus era, this paper studies to what extent the coronavirus is challenging the policies and strategies of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its offspring the Polar Silk Road. We begin with a critical overview of the BRI and illustrate the practical implications of the fact that BRI lacks an official strategy, a definition and a governing institution. We elaborate what kind of discourses and standards are attached to the BRI in general, and its latest addition, the Polar Silk Road, in particular. On the one hand, we analyze how China's pre-COVID-19 era Arctic policy and BRI documents (and norms) manifested and set the standards of climate responsibility, and, on the other hand, based on original Chinese policy documents, we debunk how these lofty political goals were rapidly and completely set aside as the new coronavirus epidemic was spreading around. Instead, the Party hastily made stipulations and policies and refocused the BRI to save Chinese overseas investments and the reputation of China in the post-coronavirus era.

Introduction

During the past decade or two, climate responsibility (or environmental responsibility in general) has emerged as an international norm that all states must comply with if they wish to be recognized as responsible international players (e.g., Falkner & Buzan, 2019; Kopra, 2018). Despite the shared objective of limiting "the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" (UNFCCC, 2015) agreed in Paris in 2015, the implementation of climate responsibility has been only partial and subject to competing interpretations (in some cases, even denial) around the globe. After the US announced to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, President Xi Jinping (2017a) promised that China, the biggest carbon emitter in the world, would take the "driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change." For time being, however, China has not taken any significant international climate initiatives or implemented considerable emissions reductions on the national level. Conversely, the lion's share of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects focus on fossil fuels (e.g., Zhou et al., 2018). To meet the objectives of the Paris climate agreement, making the BRI "sustainable and climate friendly" is of utmost importance; otherwise, "we put the world at risk from worsening pollution and severe climate change" (UN Environment, 2017a). Against this backdrop, this paper analyzes how the BRI has conceptualized climate responsibility and the ways in which it has sought to operationalize that norm in practice, if at all. As climate change proceeds much faster in the Arctic than in other parts of the globe (AMAP, 2017), we pay special attention to the northern dimensions of the BRI. The melting of the Arctic will open up new shipping routes and economic opportunities—the key reason that many non-Arctic states have become increasingly interested in taking part in Arctic affairs. China, which published its first Arctic strategy in 2018, is no exception to this pattern: It has begun to construct an identity of "near-

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Arctic" state and renamed the series of planned Arctic shipping routes "the Polar Silk Road". In June 2017, the Polar Silk Road was added to the BRI, which indicates that Chinese investments in the Arctic can be expected to increase in the coming years. Yet the pace, scope, and focus of such investments will undoubtedly be affected by the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, or COVID-19, in the late 2019/early 2020.

In addition to health risks and human suffering, COVID-19 is expected to effect long-term social, economic, and political changes in international society (e.g., Aaltola, 2020; Allen et al., 2020; Stiglitz et al., 2020). Due to the ongoing globalization of the Arctic (see Finger & Heininen, 2018), there is no reason to expect that the Arctic will represent an exception in that regard. Although it may be too early to say whether China will emerge a stronger player in the Arctic after COVID-19, it is not difficult to imagine that the far-ranging consequences of the pandemic will reshape the economic and political dynamics of the region. We analyze the ways the Chinese government has sought to readjust the BRI after the outbreak of the COVID-19 and discuss potential implications for China's activities along the Polar Silk road. We ask: What could the BRI investments in general, and their Northern dimensions in particular, look like after COVID-19, and what kind of role the norm of climate responsibility can be expected to play in those processes?

We begin with a critical overview of the BRI and illustrate the practical implications of the BRI's lack of an official strategy, a definition and a governing institution. Then we move to study how China's Arctic policy, BRI documents (and norms) manifest and set the standards of climate responsibility. Finally, we analyze China's policies to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus epidemic on the BRI or even efforts to benefit from the pandemic, and discuss their ramifications in the Arctic. Based on an analysis of China's new regulations and policy guidelines that were promulgated at the early stage of the escalating coronavirus epidemic in 2020, we argue that the central government reacted rapidly in its attempt to tackle the negative economic consequences of the epidemic. In the process, norms of environmental responsibility were largely dismissed, and the focus was on restarting the Chinese economy and limiting financial damages. We will demonstrate that major rhetorical and actual practical measures were taken in developing public health-related BRI operations and in illustrating China as a source of solution rather than as an origin of the pandemic. Some Chinese policy analysts seem to regard the economic setback of Western powers caused by coronavirus as an opportunity to advance China's interests and BRI operations at a regional level. We will conclude that in the light of our analysis, there seems to be little prospects that the BRI, or its offspring Polar Silk Road, would constitute a driver of sustainable development or low-carbon coronavirus recovery in the Arctic or beyond.

Belt and Road Initiative – what is it?

Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the BRI in Kazakhstan in March 2013. Later, in November 2013, in Jakarta he broadened the BRI to include a seabound "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." At the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2017, Xi encouraged Chinese enterprises to "go out," especially along the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to ensure the future "improvement of living standard through sustainable development." Eventually, at the same

Party Congress, the BRI was lifted into the Constitution of the Communist Party. At a juncture of this process, Beijing launched a third Silk Road strategy; the "Polar Silk Road" in 2017.

Currently more than 70 countries are taking part in the BRI across Eurasia, Africa, and the maritime Asia–Pacific, covering more than two thirds of the global population and over one third of the world's GDP (Wang & Zhao, 2019:4). As the Chinese Communist Party has injected political prestige and finance into the BRI, Beijing utilises these initiatives to decrease China's dependence on the US markets and at the same time China is increasing its global foothold. A massive flow of investments and turnkey infrastructure projects is not only changing the competitive environment and balance of power in various corners of the world, but moreover the rather low standard of corporate social and environmental responsibility of Chinese companies is further constraining the environment of recipient countries.

As these continent-shifting changes are taking place, despite various central government organizations and Xi Jinping himself has released numerous speeches on BRI it is impossible to find or construct any concrete strategy of BRI —a fact that raises questions and concerns about the BRI around the world. On the one hand, concerning the concept as such, the phrase Belt and Road *Initiative* suggests that the notion should be understood as a functional concept and process. Functional concepts are by definition inherently polyvalent, incomplete, and loose (Löwy, 1992). On the other hand, Beijing has attempted to explain or enhance the attractiveness of the BRI by attaching to it or explaining it with equally loose notions that are intended to generate a sense of hope, progress, values, and collective intentions. Consequently, we can hear Beijing repeating notions of "win-win," "equality," "right to development," "green," "sustainable development," and the new global catchword of Xi Jinping, "community of common destiny of humankind," side by side with the notion of BRI (Xi, 2016, 2018, 2019).

Although the BRI is the flagship project of China's internationalization process, Beijing has not nominated any governing body to control or to provide approvals for the numerous BRI projects being launched by central, provincial, or local-level state-owned or private businesses. In addition, in December 2017, Beijing announced new restrictions and regulations guiding the approval process of outbound investments. The regulations encourage financial institutions to prioritize finance and smooth out the red tape of BRI projects. As in China all companies carefully follow the changes of the political wind, they are now driven to grasp the opportunity of the national priority of the BRI rage and novel financial BRI supportive policies. Consequently, in the pre-COVID-19 era, hundreds if not thousands of Chinese delegations from all corners of China were travelling on a weekly basis all around the world claiming to be part of the Chinese BRI, despite there being no centralized body providing the official BRI stamp. (As with Chinese economic data in general, this also means that the Chinese official statistics of BRI investments is inaccurate.) Despite an obvious lack of transparent strategy or governing body, the official documentation of BRI exists in the form of political speeches, a wide array of stipulated regulations, research reports, and countless news announcements produced relating to BRI.

The BRI documents and the framing of climate responsibility

In 2015, Beijing issued the "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road." It lists the guiding principles of the BRI, which emphasize cooperation and peaceful coexistence, and confirm the compliance with international norms but do not explicitly mention environmental responsibility. Although climate change is mentioned a few times in this pronouncement, the document does not seek to promote the norm of climate responsibility under the BRI. For instance, it states that "*efforts* should be made to promote green and low-carbon infrastructure construction and operation management, taking into full account the impact of climate change on the construction" (NDRC, 2015, emphasis added). Yet the document does not require that those efforts should actually be effective and aspiring: no quantitative emissions reductions are stipulated.

In 2017, the "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative" was issued to "build a peaceful and prosperous 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" (NDRC & SOA, 2017). This time, green development was elevated as one of the cooperation priorities; the document emphasizes the protection of the marine environment and acknowledges the necessity of "strengthening cooperation in addressing climate change" (ibid.). It expresses China's willingness to support small island states to adapt to climate change and pledges to encourage the development of low-carbon projects in the maritime sector. Yet it makes no concrete proposals as to how BRI projects could address climate change mitigation.

In May 2017, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing. As expected, environmental issues were not high on the agenda. In his opening speech, President Xi (2017b) mentioned climate change only once: He proposed the establishment of an international coalition for green development on the Belt and Road, and promised to "provide support to related countries in adapting to climate change." Yet he acknowledged that "we should pursue the new vision of green development and a way of life and work that is green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable" (ibid.). Likewise, the joint statement issued by the forum participants did not put forward an ambitious approach toward climate responsibility but only encouraged parties that had ratified the Paris Agreement to fully implement it (*Joint Communique of the Leaders Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*, 2017).

Some efforts to incorporate environmental issues into the BRI have been made. For example, the Belt and Road Green Development Partnership was launched by various Chinese and international think tanks, environmental NGOs, and foundations in September 2016 to "help China leverage and improve its leadership in global green governance" (China Global Green Leadership). The partnership seeks to promote the fulfillment of UN sustainable-development goals and the Paris agreement, and it has organized side events at UN Climate Conferences in 2017 and 2018, for instance. The Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection (2017) formulated the "Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan," which ensures that "China attaches high importance to eco-friendly Belt and Road" and seeks to "integrate the concepts of ecological civilization and green development into the Belt and Road Initiative and create a favorable pattern of well-grounded cooperation on eco-environmental protection" by 2025.

Furthermore, "Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road" was issued in May 2017. Although it defines the concepts of ecological civilization and green development as the guiding principles of the BRI, it seems to take a very reactive approach to environmental issues. It does not call for urgent action to mitigate climate change but only refers to the international *trend* of green development (CPC Central Committee and the State Council, 2017). Thus, the document does not take a strong normative stance in the name of environmental protection, nor does it represent China as a pacesetter in international environmental politics. Instead, it refers to a very general "shared responsibility for countries in the world to prevent and curb environmental pollution and ecological damage" and states that "efforts will be made to incorporate" green principles into BRI projects (ibid.). Yet, the document states that "promoting green Belt and Road is an essential effort to participate in global environmental governance and promote green development concept." Thus, the Chinese government seemed to have broadened the agenda of BRI: it not only exerts "efforts to implement the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the field of coasts and oceans" (NDRC & SOA, 2017) but also constitutes an "important measure to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2017). According to China's minister of environmental protection Li Ganjie, "To strengthen cooperation with countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative through ecological protection is our joint effort to achieve sustainable development goals by 2030" (Yang, 2018).

The international community has also begun to pay attention to the role of the BRI in international governance. Acknowledging that "if Belt and Road investments lock countries into unsustainable infrastructure, technology, and resource extraction, this will create long-lasting negative environmental consequences" (UN Environment, 2017b), the UN Environment Programme and China's Ministry of Environmental Protection launched the International Coalition for Green Development on Belt and Road at the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017. The coalition seeks to be an "open, inclusive and voluntary international network which will bring together the environmental expertise of all partners to ensure that the Belt and Road brings long-term green and sustainable development to all concerned countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UN Environment, 2017b). By February 2019, 23 countries (Finland and Russia being the only Arctic states), 21 UN agencies and other international organizations had joined the coalition, among others (UN Environment, 2019). In April 2018, the UN Environment also prepared the Green Belt and Road Strategy, which envisions an engagement in the BRI to "incorporate environmental sustainability considerations across the different areas of focus of Belt and Road Initiative and strengthen environmental governance" (UN Environment, 2018). The ultimate goal of the strategy is "to ensure that investments made under the Belt and Road Initiative are 'green' and contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level" (ibid.). For the time being, however, there is no evidence that these efforts have succeeded in making the BRI "green."

China's Arctic policy and climate responsibility

China's Arctic involvement has grown steadily during the 2000s (see Koivurova & Kopra, 2020). In 2004, the first Chinese research station was built on Svalbard, and since 2007, China has taken part in

the work of the Arctic Council, the key intergovernmental forum in the region. Today, Chinese scholars conduct polar research onboard the icebreaker research vessels MV *Xuelong* and MV *Xuelong 2*—the latter, delivered in 2019, being China's first domestically built icebreaker. Meanwhile, Chinese corporations have become partners in various economic projects in the Arctic, especially in Russia's Siberia, where massive projects producing liquefied natural gas (LNG) take place. The development of infrastructure along the Polar Silk Road is also of interest to Chinese investors. As of September 2020, China has not assessed its environmental footprint on the Arctic and it is difficult to estimate the amount of airborne and marine pollutants coming to the Arctic that originate from China. Given its large countrywide carbon emissions and enormous demand for extractive resources, however, it is probably fair to say that China plays a decisive role in shaping the resilient future of the Arctic region.

While the Arctic was not addressed during the early stages of the BRI, the Arctic Ocean was incorporated into the BRI in 2017 (NDRC & SOA, 2017). In the same year, China's high-level representative presented a speech titled "The Arctic in the Belt and Road Initiative" at the opening ceremony of the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik. In January 2018, China published its long-awaited Arctic strategy that maintains that the BRI "will bring opportunities for parties concerned to jointly build a 'Polar Silk Road,' and facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic" (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018). In the efforts to build a Polar Silk Road, the development of the Arctic shipping routes plays an important role. According to China's Arctic white paper, the state's goals in the region include "to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic, so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and promote sustainable development of the Arctic" (ibid.). When it comes to climate responsibility, on the one hand, these policy goals call for scientific research on Arctic climate change and stress the importance of addressing climate change. On the other hand, they celebrate economic possibilities offered by the melting of the Arctic ice.

Climate change is one of, if not *the*, biggest problem in the Arctic (e.g. AMAP 2017). Against this backdrop, it is unfortunate that China's Arctic white paper does not introduce additional measures to tackle climate change although it notes that "China's emission reduction measures have a positive impact on the climatic and ecological environment of the Arctic" (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Given the "highly insufficient" score of China's nationally determined contribution under the Paris Agreement to limit the global temperature rise to 2°C or 1.5°C (Climate Action Tracker, 2019; Harris, 2017), raising the level of ambition of climate mitigation would be necessary to live up to China's climate responsibility in the Arctic and beyond. However, China's Arctic white paper pays more attention to the link between the Arctic climate change and the adverse effects of climate change in China than the ways in which the world's largest carbon emitter could tackle climate change.

The BRI can be characterized as technologically agnostic; it does not prioritize "green" technologies over others. Hence, it is unsurprising that China's Arctic white paper hardly identifies any difference between green and brown economies but "encourages them [Chinese enterprises] to participate in the exploitation of oil, gas and mineral resources in the Arctic" (State Council Information Office of the

People's Republic of China, 2018). As for clean energy cooperation, the strategy directs the country to "work with the Arctic States to strengthen clean energy cooperation, increase exchanges in respect of technology, personnel and experience in this field, explore the supply of clean energy and energy substitution, and pursue low-carbon development" (ibid.). For the time being, energy cooperation in the Yamal Peninsula, northern Russia, constitutes the key focus of China's energy interests in the Arctic (see Stepien et al., 2020). As LNG is considered less harmful for the environment than traditional fossil fuels, China's involvement in the Yamal LNG project supports its aims to reduce dependence on coal, and that in turn will reduce carbon emissions in the atmosphere.

COVID-19 pandemic and the fate of BRI

Political leaders and economic actors "do not have a monopoly on historical change" but "diseases, too, make history, although we often seem to have difficulties acknowledging this" (Hämäläinen, 2006:2). Diseases "tend to strike undetectably and unexpectedly, ignoring all human attempts to contain them, and they trigger changes whose magnitude and nature often defy comprehension (ibid.:3). The coronavirus pandemic may well trigger fundamental changes in international society in a similar way that previous pandemic diseases, such as yellow fever, the Black Death, and the Spanish flu, among others, have initiated over the past centuries (e.g., Aaltola, 2012; McNeill, 2006; Myrdall, 2006). Thinkers around the globe are debating whether the post-COVID-19 world will be "less open, less prosperous, and less free," "poorer, meaner, and smaller," and more China-centric, among other things (Allen et al., 2020; see also Stiglitz et al., 2020; Nye, 2020). No doubt the tiny virus also poses a severe challenge to the BRI and Xi Jinping's promise of doubling the Chinese GDP, completely eradicating poverty, and doubling GDP per capita by the centennial celebration of the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021 as compared with 2010.

After the initial critical cover-up of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, Beijing recognized the outbreak of the new respiratory epidemic in the mid-January 2020. Within weeks the first coronavirus cases were reported in Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Italy and the US. It is likely that the Chinese top leadership recognized at an early stage that the virus was very contagious, represented a serious threat to public health, and would severely hurt the economies of impacted countries and threaten Chinese overseas interests. By summer 2020, Beijing began to develop a complex set of debt restructuring and aid-package programs that eventually will open channels for a number of defaulting developing countries to begin bilateral negotiations with Beijing. (Albert, 2020; Sun, 2020)

A coordinated response effort began earlier in the last days of February 2020, the Chinese central government made readjustments to its BRI strategies and image campaign. On February 28, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Commerce (MOFCOM) and the China Development Bank (ministry level development bank) jointly issued the "Notice on the Development of Financial Services in Support of the New Corona Pneumonia Epidemic to Support High-Quality Co-construction of the Belt and Road Projects and Enterprises" (Shangwubu, 2020). This ministry level notice is a legally binding policy paper stipulating how regions and institutions should support BRI companies that were affected by the coronavirus. Notably, the notice does not mention climate change, sustainability, or the Arctic Silk Road at all.

In practical terms, the notice outlines a series of new financial and economic measures for companies that have labeled their foreign investments as BRI investments and are affected by the corona epidemy. The notice also calls for smoothening horizontal and vertical collaboration between local provincial- and central government-level institutional actors. The process of selecting eligible projects and companies is assigned to the provincial-level branches of the China Development Bank and the regional headquarters of the Central Enterprises Group, the biggest and most important state-owned conglomerates. The notice also requires companies to report if their employees have coronavirus and to carry out prevention and control measures. In this manner, China aims at "winning a double victory" of controlling the epidemic and continuing the buildup of Belt and Road projects without losing economic momentum (Shangwubu, 2020).

After the central government notice, a number of provinces launched their own response plans, based on their own particular strengths and development areas, for stimulating BRI projects and investments under the new corona situation. Some of these response plans are more detailed, like the cases of Guangdong and Shaanxi provinces that have 22 and 28 key tasks, respectively, while some plans, like Ningxia province's, list only a handful of targets and elaborate on a more abstract level how to develop certain business models or hubs for their BRI activities (CABRI, 2020). In June 2020, the Chinese government issued a white paper detailing its fight against COVID-19, but the document does not deal with the BRI or mention environmental impact.

Importantly, at the same time the Communist Party launched a coordinated strategic shift toward developing a public health-centered Belt and Road labeled the Health Silk Road (HSR) and began discussion of activating a Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative. The HSR is a framework that was jointly launched by the BRI and WHO in 2017 as a cross-border health collaboration platform (Beg, 2020). The Digital Silk Road was launched in 2015 to support the development of global supply-line management, smart-port technology, ICT, and the sophisticated usage of big data (Wheeler, 2020).

Both the HSR and the DSR operate under the umbrella of the BRI. The HSR was occupying almost the complete limelight until the coronavirus outbreak when that became the top priority of the BRI due to the strategic shift of Beijing (Beg, 2020). As a matter of fact, it seems that HSR became one of the leading themes of the BRI discourse and overshadowed the voices of sustainability and green development of the BRI. Intriguingly, we came across only one policy paper that took into regard the importance of sustainability in developing the BRI projects in the post-COVID-19 world (AIIB, 2020). The document was produced by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is the first Chinese-established multilateral finance institution and currently has 102 member states. During the last five years, AIIB has approved finance to 75 projects with the accumulated sum of its loans being 2 billion USD, a sum that is minuscule in comparison to the five-year accumulated direct overseas investments of China, amounting to 759 billion USD.

Arguably, the strategic shift is Beijing's response to the amounting global criticism of its early cover-up of the Coronavirus epidemic in Wuhan: It is an attempt to turn the crisis into a geo-economic opportunity and to depict China as a responsible international actor and source of solutions in this global crisis. The HSR activities include concrete and positive policy measures requiring health tests of dispatching personnel, implementing a zero epidemic human resource system, and reducing staff

rotation of the Chinese labor force operating abroad. As a part of HSR strategy, China has also offered coronavirus-related medical help and equipment to more than 90 nations expanding the original pan-European scope of HSR to cover the whole world (RMHB, 2020). A number of Chinese scholars are pointing out that China should identify opportunities in risks and name public health collaboration and assistance as an important activity that will not only help the local communities but also safeguard the operative environment of Chinese companies in host countries (Chinanews, 2020). However, some Western countries have pointed out that not all assistance is as altruistic as Beijing portrays it to be, but it should rather be understood as a "mask-diplomacy" operation, i.e. a ploy to win over local's hearts by providing them Covid-19 related medical assistance (Escobar, 2020; Beg, 2020).

The overall academic and public discussion of BRI was lying dormant at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. However, some Chinese scholars point out that the pandemic is generating an unprecedented global crisis and as a consequence will affect the BRI activities of China as well (Chinanews, 2020). China is worried about a larger outbreak of COVID-19 epidemy in developing countries. Jin Cairong, one of the leading international relations scholars in China, writes, "If it spreads to countries in the South, South Asia and Africa will cause great humanitarian disasters, and even lead to the collapse of the social order of these countries, which will have a great impact on our Belt and Road Initiative" (Chinatalk, 2020). In Jin Cairong's opinion, the crisis should be turned into an opportunity. He analyzes the BRI in a global context and points out that as Western European and North American economies are heavily affected by the virus and countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia have suffered less from the coronavirus, China should take "…this opportunity to fully advance cooperation with these two subregions ... If this is done well, in fact, our "Belt and Road" base is particularly good" (ibid.).

Concluding remarks

Over the past decade, Beijing has produced guidelines to make the BRI appear "green." Currently, China is fully aware that the COVID-19 is handicapping the BRI. As the headline-grabbing BRI fell dormant during the first months of 2020, the central government reacted swiftly. In late February it issued a legally binding notice and policy recommendations aiming at deterring the negative impact of the coronavirus on the BRI, without assessing the environmental impact of those efforts. Immediately after the notice, provinces drafted their own policies aiming at stimulating the BRI projects. The Communist Party quickly turned the crisis into a geo-economic opportunity, by altering the BRI into a global public health campaign under the label of the Health Silk Road framework. In the public discussion, Chinese scholars are also affirming that the crisis should be seen as an opportunity to support the development of public health in host countries and to gain a stronger foothold in BRI countries. Strikingly, neither the central government, the provincial plans and notices nor the scholars even mention climate responsibility, green development, or sustainability in their BRI-related policies or scholarly opinions. As of September 2020, the only policy paper that has discussed issues of sustainability in the post-COVID-19 era was produced by the Chinese-governed multilateral AIIB that is an insignificant operator in financing BRI operations. On the other hand, China's president Xi Jinping announced at the UN General Assembly in the same month that

China's carbon emissions will peak before 2030 and the state strives for carbon neutrality before 2060. Clearly, it is of utmost importance to incorporate the BRI into these targets; otherwise, global emissions will not necessarily decrease but Chinese actors continue to invest in fossil-intensive projects abroad.

What does this broader context mean for the future of the Arctic? Evidently, with regard to the BRI there have not yet been signs that China would act as a driver of sustainable development in the Arctic or promote low-carbon coronavirus recovery plans at a global level. Furthermore, our analysis indicates that the Polar Silk Road is not likely to be prioritized in any way but will continue to be a sub-initiative of the broader BRI. Instead, there might be a risk that China will take further advantage of the global economic predicament and attempt to gain stronger control of the two major sectors in the Arctic region: infrastructure building and natural resources.

It is expected that the coronavirus pandemic will accelerate digitalization around the globe, including the Arctic, where the northernmost areas lack "reliable, accessible and affordable broadband" (Arctic Council, 2017a:10) and the enhancement of "connectivity" has been identified as one of the regional priorities (Finnish Chairmanship, 2017; see also Lanteigne, 2020). For China, investments in digital infrastructure constitute one of the key interests in the Arctic and are part of the broader Digital Silk Road initiative. For the time being, Chinese investors are involved in the Arctic Connect project seeking to connect Europe and Asia via the Northeast Passage. The Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei has also unveiled plans to deploy high-speed internet in Canada's remote regions—a plan that creates new kinds of vulnerabilities in the area (Levinson-King, 2019). Given the frosty relations between Canada and China, however, the realization of these plans remains uncertain. As the expansion of 5G is viewed as a critical element of China's economic recovery after COVID-19, it can nevertheless be expected that China will intensify its efforts to build a Digital Silk Road in the Arctic (see Blanchette & Hillman, 2020; Jüris, 2020).

Due to the BRI's new-found interest in health care and public health infrastructure, it is also likely that the Chinese actors will be interested in investing in such developments in the Arctic region— a sector that the Arctic Council's One Health project introduced during the US chairmanship (2015-2017) seeks to improve. Yet it should be noted that the One Health project takes a holistic approach to health issues: it pays attention to participatory community-based approaches, addresses the "human-animal-ecosystem interface" and seeks to "identify, prevent, and manage health risks in humans, animals and their shared environment" (Arctic Council, 2017b:6). In the Arctic, hence, transboundary investments in health should promote the operationalization of the One Health concept "to enhance resiliency of the Arctic inhabitants through an enhanced understanding of climatic change impacts on health risks to people, animals, and the environment" (ibid.). In other words, the norm of climate responsibility should not be dismissed in the development of health care and public health infrastructure projects, not to mention specific needs of Indigenous peoples—a normative foundation that all Arctic investments should adhere to.

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